

CLAIMS

We claim:

1. A method for customers to communicate with and pay a utility for at least one utility
5 service, said method comprising the steps of:

establishing a customer account with said customer, said customer account including a
billing method and a payment method;

providing a communication system comprising a utility host, a customer interface, and a
control assembly programmed to control said utility service and communication between said
10 utility host and said customer interface;

communicating payment information to and from said customer using said communication
system to complete payment of at least a portion of a customer balance on said customer account
in accordance with said billing method and said payment method.

15 2. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of communicating customer account
and utility service information to and from said customer using said communication system.

3. The method of Claim 2, wherein said customer account and utility service information
comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of automatic meter reads, outage/restoral
20 monitoring, customer consumption readings, Time-Of-Use (TOU) reporting, billing capability,
tamper detections/deterrence, deferment of peak use through TOU rate information, Real Time
Pricing (RTP), headline/local news, financial quotes, energy information, home monitoring and
appliance control.

25 4. The method of Claim 3, wherein said customer account and utility service information is
provided as customized or pre-defined messages to particular customer accounts.

5. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step disconnecting and/or reconnecting said
utility service using said communication system based upon a comparison of said customer
30 account with said payment information.

6. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of managing the transfer of said utility service to a new customer or between customers using said communication system.
7. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of providing customer account usage information for said utility service using said communication system
8. The method of Claim 7, wherein said customer account usage information comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of amount used, amount remaining, rate of utility service usage, rate of charge, money used today, money used yesterday, money used this month, and utility service usage over the past twelve months.
9. The method of Claim 1, wherein said billing method comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of time based billing, fixed payment based pilling, or prepayment billing.
10. The method of Claim 1, wherein said payment method comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of direct debit, pre-authorized direct debit, credit card charging, cash payment, check payment, and debt management.
11. The method of Claim 10, wherein said debt management includes a postpayment mode and a prepayment mode.
12. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of using a smart card to store said payment information.
13. The method of Claim 1, wherein said billing method include at least one rate schedule.
14. The method of Claim 1, wherein said payment information is communicated in accordance with a payment cycle.

15. The method of Claim 1, wherein said payment cycle supports one or more parameters selected from the group consisting of a billing date, a payment period, a past due period, and a disconnect point.

16. A communication system for customers to communicate with and pay a utility for at least one utility service comprising:

a utility host programmed to store a customer account for said customer, said customer account including a billing method and a payment method;

a customer interface to communicate payment information to and from said customer to complete payment of at least a portion of a customer balance on said customer account in accordance with said billing method and said payment method; and

a control assembly in communication with said utility host and said customer interface, said control assembly being programmed to control said utility service.

17. The system of Claim 16, wherein said communication system is programmed to communicate customer account and utility service information to and from said customer.

18. The system of Claim 17, wherein said customer account and utility service information comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of automatic meter reads, outage/restoral monitoring, customer consumption readings, Time-Of-Use (TOU) reporting, billing capability, tamper detections/deterrence, deferment of peak use through TOU rate information, Real Time Pricing (RTP), headline/local news, financial quotes, energy information, home monitoring and appliance control.

19. The system of Claim 18, wherein said customer account and utility service information is provided as customized or pre-defined messages to particular customer accounts.

20. The system of Claim 16, wherein said control assembly is programmed to disconnect and/or reconnect said utility service based upon a comparison of said customer account with said payment information.

21. The system of Claim 16, wherein said communication system is programmed to manage the transfer of said utility service to a new customer or between customers.
22. The system of Claim 16, wherein said communication system is programmed to provide customer account usage information for said utility service using said communication system
23. The system of Claim 22, wherein said customer account usage information comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of amount used, amount remaining, rate of utility service usage, rate of charge, money used today, money used yesterday, money used this month, and utility service usage over the past twelve months.
24. The system of Claim 16, wherein said billing method comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of time based billing, fixed payment based pilling, or prepayment billing.
25. The system of Claim 16, wherein said payment method comprises one or more selected from the group consisting of direct debit, pre-authorized direct debit, credit card charging, cash payment, check payment, and debt management.
26. The system of Claim 25, wherein said debt management includes a postpayment mode and a prepayment mode.
27. The system of Claim 16, further comprising a smart card reader for reading a smart card storing said payment information.
28. The system of Claim 16, wherein said billing method include a rate schedule.
29. The system of Claim 16, wherein said payment information is communicated in accordance with a payment cycle.

30. The system of Claim 16, wherein said payment cycle supports one or more parameters selected from the group consisting of a billing date, a payment period, a past due period, and a disconnect point.

5 31. The system of Claim 16, wherein said utility host comprises a computer running application software.

32. The system of Claim 16, wherein said customer interface comprises an LCD display, navigation push-buttons, a numeric keypad, and multi-colored LED's.

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33. The system of Claim 16, wherein said control assembly comprises a power switch, control electronics programmed to complete usage calculations and external communications, and a transceiver for communicating with said utility host.

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34. A communication system for customers to remotely communicate with and pay a utility for at least one utility service comprising a customer control system at a location remote from said utility, said customer interface being programmed to communicate payment information to and from said customer to complete payment of at least a portion of a customer balance on a customer account in accordance with a billing method and a payment method stored at said utility; and to control said utility service to said customer.